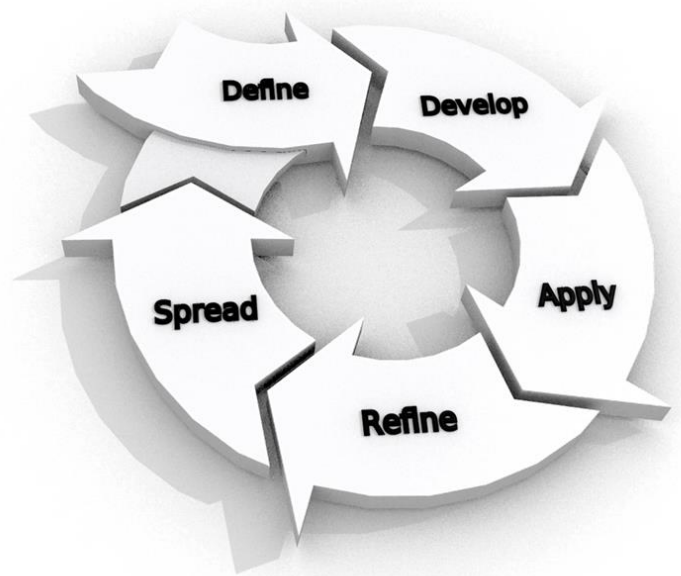


Spreading Unhappiness

Every so often I get involved in creating a list of “definitive values”: status definitions for wells; countries a company operates in; data categories; that sort of thing. There are all sorts of justifications for creating these lists, they could be applied as tags for a document management system, employed as values in an application or navigation terms on a web site. Indeed the most effective lists are those that can be applied across a wide range of systems, when the corporate web site and the document management system share a definition of the term “stratigraphic column” it makes everyone’s life easier. The most valuable lists are those that touch the greatest number of disparate groups. Naturally enough these are precisely the lists that require the most deft negotiation and delicate diplomacy.

I’m sure that most oil industry professionals will have been involved in the type of workshop where these lists are hammered out. Usually they start with someone proposing an initial set of values, these are then discussed, argued over, modified, clarified and debated. At some point a restricted “real world” example is brought in, say a collection of documents or the data from an active field. These elements are then classified using the list, which reveals some missing values and some lurking ambiguity that needs to be resolved. Then the



process cycles round again. At best this activity hones the list converging to the point where it matches the need “well enough”, in which case it is endorsed, published and adopted. At worst the workshop degenerates into mutually hostile cliques each determined to impose their particular understanding. In many cases the thing that determines which of these paths is taken is the skill of the workshop moderator, a good one is able to keep prodding the conversation forward by focusing on the important issues, bad ones fall into the trap of allowing embedded interests to keep getting ensnared into repeating unresolvable debates.

With these “agreed lists” consistency should usually be the overriding goal. If everyone uses the same list then the benefit to the overall organisation can be enormous, but having a few “hold-outs” that refuse to adopt the new standard can have a disproportionate effect on the final result. It is not unusual to find that different groups “traditionally” use particular terms in mutually incompatible ways. If some of those using the list have to be kept aware that one of the values is used in the “wrong” sense (from their point of view) that is worth doing to achieve the overall benefit. Given the fact that there is often no final list that can ever fully satisfy all, the best approach is usually to ensure that everyone leaves the discussion similarly disgruntled. That is, these workshops should be seen as an exercise in spreading unhappiness equally amongst all the participants.